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Veterans seek meeting on POW issue

DALLAS (UPI)—A national Vietnam veterans organization said it has proof that 22 American soldiers are being held captive in Laos and demanded a meeting with President Reagan to discuss obtaining their release.

The National Vietnam Veterans Coalition also announced it had worked with the Laotian underground to transfer the remains of three American soldiers to U.S. custody, beginning yesterday.

The group declined to give the name of the one body that has been positively identified.

"Our president, as far as I'm concerned, has done more than any other president on this issue, but we're sick and tired of this [waiting]," said Col. Jack Bailey, head of Operation Rescue.

Col. Bailey, whose organization helps refugees escape Vietnam and coordinates efforts to locate American POWs, warned that time is running out for Mr. Reagan to act before veterans act on their own.

"There is a live American in Laos and we know it, and if he [Mr. Reagan] doesn't act, we will do something," said Col. Bailey, a veteran of World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam. "We spent \$370 million returning the hostages from Iran, and I don't think we spent even \$1 million on returning the POWs."

"The Laotian resistance has stated unequivocally that there are 22 Americans still alive in Laos in three locations," said Mr. Bailey.

He said the veterans coalition has maps, photographs and eyewitness statements to back up those claims.

Tom Burch, national coordinator of the National Vietnamese Veterans Coalition, released a stack of what he said were CIA documents confirming the presence of American POW camps in Laos and accused the Pentagon and State Department of withholding information from President Reagan. The documents detail 2,700 reports from refugees about live Americans in Southeast Asia.

Mr. Burch also introduced a Vietnamese refugee who said he saw eight

Americans who were being held captive in a cave in North Vietnam two years ago.

The group staged a parade along the route to the Republican National Convention site Sunday night, and the handful of marchers said they had never seen so many unfriendly faces lining the streets.

"But I think the attention we're going to receive nationally is going to benefit everyone," said rally organizer Rene Pena.

"You can't satisfy us with eight bodies every six months," said Gary Thomas, who served as a sergeant major in Vietnam.

"No country in the world should ever abandon their men, and these men have been abandoned."

The relentless sun kept the crowd far smaller than the 5,000 that organizers had predicted.

At a ceremony later, Traece Orr, of Irving, Texas, wept as she lit a candle to honor her brother, who has been missing in action in Vietnam since 1969. When all the candles were lit at the ceremony, the flames spelled out "MIA POW."

Other rallies and activities on convention eve included a protest against U.S. intervention in Central America and a mass voter registration drive by the Alliance for Justice, which claimed between 15,000 and 16,000 registrations in low-income Dallas neighborhoods.

About 300 protesters erected 55,000 tiny wooden crosses on a grassy slope near the Dallas Convention Center and read the names of those killed in Central American fighting.

"We hope to make visible the invisible war in Central America," said Sister Patricia Ridgley, spokeswoman for the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador.